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Viewing cable 08MANAGUA153, ORTEGA TIGHTENS CONTROL OVER ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at theparagraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#08MANAGUA153**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08MANAGUA153	2008-02-08 16:51	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-30/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2758456.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-30/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2758467.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-30/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2758468.aspx>
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<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-23/Mundo/Relacionados/Mundo2758764.aspx>
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<http://www.nacion.com/2011-05-16/Mundo/NotasSecundarias/Mundo2757239.aspx>
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<http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3991/dra-yadira-centeno-desmiente-cable-diplomatico-eeuu>
<http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3968/pellas-pronostico-a-eeuu-victoria-de-ortega-en-2006>
<http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3967/barreto-era-ldquo-fuente-confiable-rdquo-para-eeuu>

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2058
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/04/2018
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [NU](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)
SUBJECT: ORTEGA TIGHTENS CONTROL OVER ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT

REF: MANAGUA 0105

Classified By: Ambassador Paul Trivelli, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1.(C) The Ortega administration is tightening control over the electoral environment in the run up to the November municipal elections. Beginning in late December 2007, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) began firing technical staff with ties to Liberal parties. Of particular concern were the removal of the Liberal heads of four departmental-level CSE offices and those responsible for cedulas (voter registration cards). In addition, CSE magistrates told NGO leaders that they are considering postponing elections in the Departments of Chinandega, Matagalpa and the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). The CSE magistrates also threatened to deny Etica y Transparencia, the most prominent domestic election observer group, permission to observe the municipal elections due to alleged violations of electoral laws in previous elections. We can expect similar efforts in the months ahead as the Ortega administration seeks to minimize the risk of electoral defeat in the municipal elections. End Summary.

PURGING THE SUPREME ELECTORAL COUNCIL

¶2. (C) Beginning in late December 2007, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) began firing technical staff with ties to Liberal parties or "unreliable" FSLN members. The firings began with the Liberal heads of the Departmental Electoral Councils (CEDs) in Managua, Chinandega, Nuevo Segovia and Rivas (key departments where the FSLN is likely to lose municipalities in the November elections). According to press accounts, these individuals were all replaced by FSLN administrative staff. Elvis Armengol, the recently fired Director for Cedulation in Managua, told us that by mid-January 84 technical staff (reportedly all Liberals) had been fired and that at least another 80-90 would be fired in the coming weeks. The firings involved all levels of the CSE (municipal, departmental and national) and covered all regions of the country. By January 24, two NGO contacts reported that as many as 300 technical staff may have been fired in total, though some reportedly were re-hired. According to two other CSE contacts, the CSE employed over 600 staff nationally as of December 2007 and confirmed that at least 95 people have been fired to date.

¶13. (C) Armengol told us that the only office where no firings occurred was the office responsible for production of the new modernized cedulas. That office, consisting of approximately forty-five people, remains entirely composed of FSLN loyalists. According to Armengol and our NGO contacts, the CSE claims the firings were for "incompetence" and/or "negligence" and have created an "environment of fear" among all CSE staff. As of late January, CSE officials were claiming publicly that some offices had to be shut down due to absence of an approved budget for 2008, and that the firings were part of their normal practice and not partisan-based.

¶14. (C) Armengol told us there was no "triggering event" for the firings but that it was part of an early effort to control the mechanics of the electoral process. Armengol noted that the FSLN had taken control of the cedulation effort in June 2006, by-passing the municipal CSE structures and going straight to FSLN local party officials to distribute cedulas. For the November municipal elections, Armengol reported the CSE is planning to implement a cedulation campaign through secondary schools to directly distribute cedulas via the FSLN-aligned teachers union. This strategy would again cut out municipal structures and ensure a higher percentage of FSLN loyalists get cedulas. Armengol and our NGO contacts stated that CSE Magistrate Emmett Lang, a close confidant of Ortega, was personally directing the effort to purge the CSE and to tighten FSLN party control over the electoral process.

CSE LOOKING TO POSTPONE ELECTIONS AND BLOCK OBSERVATION

¶15. (C) In a January 21 meeting with the Nicaraguan NGO Etica y Transparencia (Ethics and Transparency), CSE Magistrates Roberto Rivas and Emmet Lang confirmed the CSE is "seriously considering" a proposal by local authorities to postpone municipal elections in the RAAN (reftel). Rivas reported that the damage to infrastructure was so severe and lasting that the request by local authorities had merit and that the CSE, with other government offices, would be traveling again to the region in the coming weeks to make a final decision.

¶16. (C) Surprisingly, Rivas also revealed that the CSE is considering delaying elections in the departments of Matagalpa and Chinandega. In Matagalpa, severe flooding in September and October had damaged key infrastructure and sixteen thousand cedulas for the department were "lost." In Chinandega, Rivas cited "migration" as the reason for considering a postponement, but did not elaborate on what kind of migration or how it impacted CSE's ability to conduct the local elections. Chinandega lies in the heartland of FSLN support but public opinion polls show that support eroding.

¶17. (C) In the same meeting and a subsequent January 24 meeting with Etica y Tranparencia (EyT), Rivas and Lang suggested that EyT was unlikely to be registered to observe the municipal elections because of violations of electoral law in previous election cycles, e.g., EyT published quick count results prior to the CSE's publication of official results, a supposed violation of electoral regulations. EyT board members report they have also come under increasing individual pressure to scale back their criticism of the Ortega administration or risk losing their ability to conduct election observation or even face investigations into their personal finances.

OPPOSITION CONCERNED ABOUT CEDULATION

¶18. (C) Kitty Monterrey, a senior advisor for the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), told us that the firings, potential election delays, and the continued problems with likely voters getting cedulas seriously threaten the democratic opposition's ability to compete in the local elections. In particular, Monterrey believes that the firing of some key technical staff would negatively affect the ability of

Liberal and independent voters, especially in Managua, to obtain cedulas thereby suppressing the pro-democratic vote and raising the FSLN proportion of the voting population. Enrique Saenz, head of the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS) party in the National Assembly, echoed this sentiment in a January 31 meeting with the Ambassador. He noted that ALN and MRS potential voters are much less likely to have cedulas than FSLN voters. He cited a recent poll that showed 17 percent of potential ALN voters and 28 percent of potential MRS voters simply do not have the ID cards. With these ongoing cedula problems and lack of transparency in the CSE's actions, Saenz suggested that civil society and the political parties will have to take on an even greater, more aggressive, role in electoral observation to hold officials accountable.

CSE DOWNPLAYS REPORTS OF PARTISANSHIP

¶9. (C) In meetings with a US NGO providing election support to the CSE, Rodrigo Barreto, Rivas' chief of staff, discounted the reports of widespread firing and election delays. He confirmed that "about 80 people" were fired, but that none of them were from "critical" positions. He claimed those fired included mechanics, drivers, operators, "the lover of one magistrate" and the daughter of another and was unaware of the political affiliation of any of those fired. The lack of funding and the need to modernize CSE operations was cited as the reason for the majority of the firings. Barreto asserted that the CSE magistrates are interested in transparent elections and would not engage in partisan actions, such as the firing of Liberal staff or the postponement of elections where one party could lose. Barreto also claimed that three of the Liberal CED presidents removed in December will be replaced by ALN representatives. (Note - ALN President Eduardo Montealegre has publicly and privately said this is not true, and press reports indicate these officials were replaced with FSLN staff. End note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The Ortega administration, with the clear support of the Arnoldo Aleman loyalist magistrates on the CSE, is seeking to establish early control over the electoral mechanisms in order to minimize the risk of an electoral defeat in the November municipal elections by tilting the playing field in the "Pacto's" favor. In the RAAN and the Departments of Chinandega and Matagalpa, the FSLN stands a serious risk of losing a majority of the municipalities to a united PLC-ALN party ticket. Delaying the elections would give the FSLN a greater opportunity to minimize the potential damage and divide the pro-democratic forces. In addition, as the opposition seeks to turn the elections into a referendum on the Ortega administration, turnout of the electorate will become key. The FSLN, as evidenced by the apparent purges of technical staff in the CSE, is looking to control the mechanics of who votes in order to manipulate turnout to its own advantage. In this effort they have a willing partner in Aleman's loyalists on the CSE. Aleman clearly does not want a strong turnout either - as much of the PLC base is increasingly vocal in opposition to the Almena-Ortega powersharing "Pacto" and his personal efforts to disrupt Liberal unity. A strong turnout could undermine his ability to select candidates and control the municipal party structures.

¶11. (C) We can probably expect more efforts like these, especially restricting the ability of NGOs to observe the elections, in the coming months. Ortega gambled once on open elections and lost. Now that he is in power, he is unlikely to make the same gamble twice. In this opaque electoral environment, we also believe it will be all the more imperative that civil society has the training, resources and capacity to mobilize voters and oversee the elections.

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